9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

CHAPTER XVII

Casals and Countryside

OWING TO THE DENSITY AND RAPID GROWTH OF THE population, to the lack of soil and to the abundance of excellent building-stone, which not only takes on in the course of ages a beautiful patina but is easy to work, the proportion of Malta's built-up area to the area under cultivation is probably uniquely high. Unique is probably also the "Red Soil Law" whereby anyone about to erect a house is compelled to dig up and hand over to the Government (which removes it for him) any soil there may be on the site of the future structure, so that the precious earth may not be buried and lost for ever to the island's cultivators.

So precious is it that the smallest pockets, however inaccessibly they may be situated, are jealously conserved. Malta is low-lying—in the words of Tasso

giace Malta fra l'onde occulta, e bassa

—and only on the thyme-covered cliffs of the south-western stretch of coast does it rise as high as 800 feet. These cliffs are wild and rugged and sheer, but here and there, as they drop precipitously to the sea, narrow ledges of earth-covered rock cling precariously to their face. But even these *redums*, as they are termed—the like of which I have seen only on that hermit-inhabited spur of Mount Athos which is called Kerasia—are brought into use by the indomitable Maltese farmer of the locality, who sometimes lives in the caves beside them with his family and his animals as his Stone Age predecessor lived in them before him.

Thus every nook and cranny of these islands is eloquent of their past: towns; casals; little country chapels, farmhouses and isolated gateways, which are often adorned with

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

some sculptured escutcheon; the old stone *fougasses*[1] to be encountered along the coast; even the very cliffs; even tiny Comino, from whose stony fields, where is cultivated the cumin seed from which the island takes its name, there rises one of the massive square keeps which the Knights scattered throughout their territory.[2]

The casals are, as has been said in an earlier chapter, not villages, but compact stone townships of tall houses and narrow streets, solidly built in good substantial Baroque architecture. Their outskirts, as likely as not, are dignified with some ancient country-house concealed behind high walls amid charming gardens—the beauty and seclusion of the Maltese gardens are justly proverbial—while the focus of the casal, both literally and metaphorically, is the parish church. This is generally a great Baroque pile of golden sandstone flanked by two massive towers, but an exception is the Parish Church of Mosta, built in the classical style in the middle of the nineteenth century mainly by the efforts, both technical and financial, of the villagers themselves to the design of the ingenious Maltese architect Grognet de Vassé mentioned in Chapter II. It is topped by a dome that claims to be the third largest in the world, being surpassed in size only by those of S. Sophia in Constantinople and S. Peter's in Rome, higher internally than the dome of the Roman Pantheon and exceeding by sixteen feet the diameter of that of S. Paul's in London.

[1] Patrick Brydone (*cf.* pp. 143–147) gives an interesting account of this little-known form of coastal defence; "For we found, to our no small amazement, that the rocks were not only cut into fortifications but likewise into artillery to defend these fortifications: being hollowed out in many places into the form of immense mortars. The charge is said to be about a barrel of gunpowder, over which they place a large piece of wood, made exactly to fit the mouth of the chamber. On this they heap a great quantity of cannon balls, shells, or other deadly materials; and when an enemy's ship approaches the harbour, they fire the whole into the air: and they pretend it produces a very great effect, making a shower for two or three hundred yards round that would sink any vessel."

[2] An excellent companion for the exploration of the island is F. Weston's *Walks in Malta*, published in Valetta. Later booklets include Showell Styles, *Walks and Climbs in Malta* (Valetta, 2nd edn., 1952), and H. H. Hick, *Walks in Gozo* (Malta, 1953).